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ABSTRACT

This research reports on the characteristics of middle level teachers, their work environment, their professional and academic preparation, their leadership roles, and their competency levels as perceived by their principals. The research design was constructed as the third of three "decade studies" which focused on middle level schools and were sponsored by the National Association of Secondary School Principals. The previous studies were in 1982 and 1991. Trend data are addressed. Consistent with previous studies, middle level schools were defined in the 2000 study as those serving young adolescents in any combination of grades five through nine. Principals of all middle level schools in the United States were invited to participate in the online survey. Over 1,400 principals completed the questionnaire. Survey questions addressed four major areas relative to middle level schools: context and environment, leaders and leadership structures, curriculum, and school improvement practices. This paper extracts the data specific to teachers from each of those major areas. Implications are discussed and recommendations made with reference to the recruitment of future middle level teachers, the needed expansion of their knowledge base regarding the specific developmental needs of early adolescents, the development of skills required to be effective as members of a grade level team, the knowledge required to develop interdisciplinary curriculum, and their training as teacher leaders. (Contains 34 references.) (Author/SM)

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Teachers in Middle Level Schools

Implications and Recommendations from a National Study

by

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To the
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Special thanks to my colleagues
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(NSLMLS)
Research team

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Abstract: Teachers in Middle Level Schools: Implications and Recommendations from a National Study (Vicki N. Petzko, 11/02)

This research reports on the characteristics of middle level teachers, their work environment, their professional and academic preparation, their leadership roles, and their competency levels as perceived by their principals. Implications for professional development of current middle level teachers are noted, as are recommendations for the recruitment of future teachers of middle level students.

The research design was constructed as the third of three "decade studies" which focused on middle level schools and were sponsored by NASSP (National Association of Secondary School Principals). Previous studies were in 1982 and 1991. Trend data are addressed.

Consistent with previous NASSP studies, middle level schools were defined in the 2000 study as those serving young adolescents in any combination of grades five through nine. Principals of all middle level schools in the United States were invited to participate in the on-line survey. Over 1,400 principals completed the questionnaire. Survey questions addressed four major areas relative to middle level schools: their context and environment, the leaders and leadership structures, curriculum, and school improvement practices. This paper extracts the data specific to the teachers from each of those major areas.

Results present characteristics of middle level teachers, their academic preparation and professional preparation, the environment in which they work, their perceived strengths and weaknesses, and their roles as teachers leaders. In addition, their involvement in teaming and interdisciplinary instruction are discussed.

Implications are discussed and recommendations made with reference to the recruitment of future middle level teachers, the needed expansion of their knowledge base regarding the specific developmental needs of early adolescents, the development of skills required to be effective as members of a grade level team, the knowledge required to develop interdisciplinary curriculum, and their training as teacher leaders.

The purpose of this paper is to summarize and synthesize the data on teachers as reported in a recent national study of middle level schools (Valentine, Clark, Hackmann & Petzko, 2002, *National Study of Leadership in Middle Level Schools (NSLMLS), Volume 1*). This paper begins with a summary of the characteristics of the middle level schools at the dawn of the new millenium, followed by the characteristics of middle level teachers, the instructional context in which they work, and their involvement in school leadership. Implications are discussed and recommendations made with reference to several significant areas: the recruitment of future middle level teachers, the implementation of professional development programs designed to expand teacher knowledge of early adolescence, the development of skills required for teachers to be effective team members and teacher leaders, the development of curriculum which is truly interdisciplinary as well as instruction which is effectively integrated, and the assurance of mastery for all middle level students.

The research design for the NSLMLS was constructed as the third of three "decade studies" which focused on middle level schools and their leaders, sponsored by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) (Valentine, Clark, Irvin, Keefe & Melton, 1993; Valentine, Clark, Nickerson, Keefe, 1981)[i]. Consistent with the previous NASSP studies, middle level schools were defined as those serving young adolescents in any structural combination of grades five through nine. Principals of all middle level schools in the United States were initially contacted with a letter of invitation to participate in the 2000 study, and provided with the URL and a password for the survey. The questionnaire consisted of five sections: all principals were asked to complete the first four sections and were randomly assigned to one of the four subdivisions of the final section. Over 1,400 principals completed the on-line questionnaire during the 2000 spring and summer months.[ii] Each of the major areas of the study, the context and environment of middle schools, the leaders and leadership structures, educational

programs and instructional practices, and school improvement methods is reported in *The National Study of Leadership in Middle Level Schools, Volume I* (Valentine, et. al., 2002). Data explicitly pertaining to the teachers in middle level schools were extracted and analyzed for this paper.

General School Characteristics

Over the past three decades, the campaign to develop schools designed to meet the unique needs of early adolescents has made great strides. Paul S. George told middle grades educators in 1999 that the "...middle school movement is ... the most successful grass roots movement in American educational history " (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 1). The following data demonstrate how middle level schools have changed since 1980, and develop a snapshot of the defining elements of the educational context in which middle school teachers taught in the year 2000.

Grade level configuration: The dominant grade level configurations reported in this study were grades 5-8, 6-8, 7 & 8, and 7-9. In 2000, 59% of the schools in the study were identified as serving students in grades 6-7-8, compared to 50% in 1992, 15% in 1980, and 6% in 1965. Middle schools that serve students in grades 6-7-8 have represented the prominent grade level configuration since 1992. The once dominant configuration serving grades 7-8-9 represented 5% of the middle level schools in 2000, dropping from 42% in 1980 and 67% in 1965. Schools with students in grades 7 and 8 comprise 17% of the respondent schools compared to 31% in 1980 . Another 10% of the schools serve students in grades 5-6-7-8, compared to 4% in 1980.

Enrollment: Despite a clear preference in the literature for small schools, the data did not show any evidence that large schools were becoming extinct. Thirteen percent (13%) of the schools had enrollment of more than 1000 students, compared to 16% in 1992 and 13% in 1980. Thirty-six percent (36%) of the schools reported enrollment of 600-999, compared to 35% in

1992 and 42% in 1980. In 2000, schools with less than 600 students continue to represent the largest element of middle level schools: 51% in 2000, 49% in 1992, and 45% in 1980.

Classroom teacher to student ratio: Similar to data reported in 1992 and 1980, the most frequent class size ratio was one teacher to 21-25 students. There was a reported decrease in large classes (32% with one teacher to 32 or more students, compared to 39% in 1992 and 36% in 1980), and a corresponding increase in the percent of schools noting smaller class size ratios (27% with one teacher to 11-20 students, compared to 18% in 1992 and 19% in 1980). Although a desirable trend toward smaller classes is evident, it is still the case that approximately one third of the students in middle schools are still in very large classes, where it may be difficult for "teachers (to) have the opportunity to know (them) well enough to understand them and treat them as individuals" (CCAD, 1989, p. 37).

Student Attendance: In the past three decades, some middle level schools appear to have made significant progress in improved student attendance. Principals in 94% of the schools reported average daily attendance (ADA) of 90% or greater, compared to 90% in 1992 and 79% in 1980. Significant differences and a negative correlation are evident, however, when the data are disaggregated according to the percent of students receiving free or reduced lunch (FRL). Schools with a high incidence of FRL have much lower attendance rates than do schools with a low incidence of FRL. For example, 62% of schools with 0-10% FRL report 96% or higher attendance, compared to 14% of the schools with 91-100% FRL. Although many middle level schools have achieved excellence in student attendance, it is evident that the challenge still exists for schools of poverty.

Violence: The tragic incidents of violence in some schools in the late 1990's were not evident in most middle level schools in this study. In fact, the number of violent acts toward students and/or adults appeared to have stabilized or decreased. Due to the fact that data on school violence had not been collected in either the 1980 or the 1992 study, respondents were asked their *perceptions of* changes in school violence in the past ten years. Thirty-five percent

(35%) said violence toward adults had decreased, 49% stated it had remained about the same, and 16% noted an increase. Similar observations were reported regarding student-to-student violence. It was corroborated that within the last five years, 95% of the schools had undertaken one or more measures to reduce violence. The most common measure was the development of a crisis management plan (86%). Other frequently implemented procedures were the establishment of closer relationships with law enforcement (83%), changes in disciplinary consequences (74%), introduction of conflict resolution (56%) or peer mediation (51%) programs, and enforcement of more stringent disciplinary regulations (51%). Although generally positive, the data cannot foster contentment: teachers in 16% of the middle level schools work in increasingly violent situations and almost half of them have seen no improvement despite substantive efforts to reduce violence.

In summary, middle level teachers in the year 2000 are likely to be teaching in schools of less than 600 and which serve students in grades 6-7-8. They are likely to have somewhat smaller class sizes and be somewhat less subjected to violence than were their 1992 and 1980 correlates. Unless they work in schools of poverty, they are more likely to have higher attendance rates in their classes than in the past. Although an initial reaction would be that these are positive trends and conditions, there are also accompanying causes for concern, which are presented in the final section of this paper.

Teacher Characteristics

Teacher Gender: Despite a near universal acceptance of the importance of both male and female role models for young adolescents, the schools in this research reported a growing predominance of female teachers. Eighty-nine percent (89%) of the schools reported that their faculties were more than 50% female, compared to 86% in 1992 and 62% in 1980. While this is consistent with national data in elementary and high schools, the commonality does not negate the potential detrimental effects of middle schools with few positive male role models (Columbia Group, 2002). A diverse population of middle level educators remains a goal.

Certification: The importance of teachers who are knowledgeable about and committed to early adolescents is a basic doctrine throughout the history of middle level education (NASSP 1985; CCAD, 1989; Valentine & Mogar, 1992; McEwin, Dickinson, Erb & Scales, 1995; NMSA, 1995). In Turning Points 2000, Jackson & Davis corroborate that conviction in their statement "increasing middle grades teachers' knowledge and skills before and during their tenure is critical to the success of middle grades education" (p. 94).

"The sad fact remains that the majority of teachers throughout the history of the middle school movement have not been educated to teach at this level" (Dickinson & Butler, 2001, p. 8). The results of the NSLMLS confirm that of other studies: while progress has been made in this realm, there is still much work to be done. This study reported an increase in the percent of schools with a majority of teachers who have middle level certification (increasing from 11% in 1980 and 1992 to 18% in 2000), however, most schools (52%) still employ a majority of teachers with secondary certification. There was also an increase in the percent of schools reporting that most teachers hold an elementary license, expanding from 9% in 1980 to 26% in 1992 and 30% in 2000. The fact remains that over 80% of the schools in the study report that most of their teachers do not have middle level certification.

Principals' Concerns about Teachers: When principals were asked their degree of concern about issues in their schools, it was evident that the lack of expertise in middle level concepts was significant. Seventy-seven percent (77%) were "concerned" about the lack of teachers specifically prepared for middle level education (26% highly concerned and 51% somewhat concerned). "Teachers' inability or unwillingness to engage in developmentally appropriate practices" was of concern to 76% (25% highly concerned and 51% somewhat concerned). An even higher percentage of principals were concerned about a lack of authentic, interdisciplinary or integrated instruction (78%: 24% highly concerned and 54% somewhat concerned).

Principals indicated additional concerns that were related to middle level philosophy. Seventy-two percent (72%) were concerned about the lack of developmentally appropriate assessment (23% highly concerned and 49% somewhat concerned); 69% were concerend about exploratory teachers feeling like "second class citizens" (18% highly concerned and 51% concerned); 69% were also concerned about the effect of "standards" emphases on best middle level instructional practices (18% highly concerned and 51% concerned). Despite the above, principals rated the general quality of the work of the teachers in their school as between "good" and "excellent", specifically, 67% rated teachers as excellent and 29% rated them as "good."

When principals were asked about their perceived roadblocks to success [iii], issues related to teachers were rated low in comparison to issues of time, mandates and funding. Insufficient time, imposed mandates, and inadequate funding were categorized as moderate or serious roadblocks by 80-89% of the respondents. In comparison, "lack of knowledge among staff regarding programs for middle level students" was perceived by 60% of the principals as a moderate or serious roadblock; "teacher turnover" was only perceived as a moderate or serious roadblock by 39% of the principals. Principals did, however, see the inability to provide time for teacher planning and professional development as a significant roadblock, with 75% identifying it as a moderate or serious factor.

In summary, the teachers in middle level schools in the year 2000 were likely to be female, not licensed specifically for middle grades, and perceived by their principals as needing additional professional development in middle level concepts, developmentally appropriate practices, and interdisciplinary or integrated instruction. Despite their shortcomings, however, their principals regarded them positively, and assessed their inadequacies as only "moderate" roadblocks to the development of excellent middle level schools.

The Instructional Context for Middle Level Teachers

As the picture of middle level teachers of 2000 evolves, numerous questions also emerge. What is the organization of their teaching environment? How do they insure success for all students? The instructional context emanates from the following data.

Organization for Instruction: The percent of schools where teachers work in interdisciplinary teams (79%) has increased dramatically since 1992 (57%), as has the percent of schools that claim some sort of interdisciplinary schedule and allow teacher teams to use time in a flexible manner. Interdisciplinary teaming was clearly the most common instructional format in grades 5,6,7 and 8. English/language arts, math, science, and social studies were core team subjects in 90% of the schools, with the addition of reading in about one half of those schools. The most common team size was four teachers, and in approximately 60% of the schools teachers assisted in the selection of original team members as well as replacements when vacancies occurred. Common planning time for core teachers was scheduled in 90% of the schools; 55% reported that core teachers spent two to four hours a week planning together and another 22% estimated more than four hours.

Success for All Students. A review of the middle level literature base reveals that virtually all middle level advocates are opposed to the practice of tracking students. *Turning Points* (CCAD, 1989), *This We Believe* (NMSA, 1995), and *Turning Points 2000* (Jackson & Davis, 2000), each discourage the rigid sorting of students by perceived academic ability. Slavin (1995) summarizes this resolve, stating that "no one could argue that ability grouping is beneficial to students in general" (p. 221). In opposition to this resolve, most of the schools in this study reported that they continue to use ability grouping. Although 93% of the schools assigned students to teams in a heterogenous manner (compared to 88% in 1992), 85% of the schools used some sort of ability grouping within teams (compared to 82% in 1992 and 88% in 1980). In 72% of the schools in 2000, students were assigned to distinct classes based on their ability; another 13% of the schools, students were heterogeneously assigned to classes, and grouped by ability

within that class. Only 12% of the schools that used ability grouping were considering its elimination.

Whether or not a school endorses or sanctions ability grouping, the assurance of mastery for every student remains a critical issue for all middle level teachers. An effective middle school is organized to "allow some students to learn as fast as they can while ensuring that others will be allowed to learn as slow as they must" (Toepfer, 1992, p. 240). This study showed that when a unit of study was concluded, 45% of the teachers assigned the grades students earned and moved the entire class to the next unit of study. Only 49% of the teachers created additional learning activities for the students who had not demonstrated content mastery, and only 60% of those teachers changed the student's grade when mastery was achieved. It is evident that almost half of the middle level teachers in this study are not teaching to assure that all students achieve mastery, nor is there any certainty that their students have the prerequisite skills for subsequent learning activities or advanced concepts.

Additional Programs and Practices

Teachers in middle level schools in 2000 are affiliated with a variety of supplemental instructional contexts. The most common scheduling model, used in 57% of the schools, is that of a disciplinary schedule, where students move from teacher to teacher according to a pre-determined time frame. Forty-two percent (42%) of the schools report use of an interdiciplinary schedule, where most of the schedule is implemented as flexible blocks of time to be allocated as the team decides. The most common organizational approach for gifted programs is for students to be taught in heterogenous classes with individualized assignments, or to be excused for "released time". In over 90% of the schools, students with disabilities spend at least half of their time in regular education classes. The majority of classroom assessments are multiple choice, short answer, fill-in-the-blank, or matching tests, where performance assessments only make up 23% of assessment practices. Most schools (62%) do not practice any type of multigrade grouping, nor do most practice any "looping" or multiyear instruction (85%).

Teacher Involvement in School Leadership

One of the eight major recommendations from *Turning Points* (CCAD, 1989) is that decisions concerning the experiences of middle grade students should be made by the adults who know them best. Principals responding to this survey indicated that this recommendation was the fourth most important of the eight *Turning Points* recommendations, following (1) "create a community of learners", (2) "teach a core of common knowledge", and (3) "ensure success for all students". Thus the need for ongoing teacher leadership in middle level schools is established. This study confirmed that teachers are involved in school governance as members of school leadership teams, as grade level team leaders, and as members of the entire faculty.

Leadership Teams: Eighty-eight percent (88%) of the schools in 2000 reported some sort of school leadership teams, an increase of 20% since 1992. Teachers are members of those teams in 82% of the schools, and (teacher) team leaders are members in 44% of the schools. Leadership team members are selected by faculty 33% of the time, appointed by administration 34% of the time, and volunteer 25% of the time. The role of the leadership team is typically advisory (making recommendations). Leadership teams have more authority regarding the development of vision/mission/goals and student behavior plans than they do regarding curriculum, budget, and hiring. When queried about the school improvement process, over half of the responding principals indicated that the leadership team was involved in the development of a comprehensive school improvement plan. Specifically, they were most likely to have engaged in the purposeful study of best practices for middle level instruction, the development of a mission statement, the analysis of data, and the development of goals and a plan to accomplish those goals.

Team Leaders: In schools in this study that employed teaming, 71% had designated team leaders. The most common method of determining team leadership was for teams to select their own leaders (48%). Twenty-three percent (23%) of the schools rotated the leadership among team members, and in another 25% of the schools, the leaders were appointed by the administration.

Team leaders were rated as having less decision-making authority than school leadership teams, but more than the faculty as a whole.

In summary, the instructional context for middle level teachers is grounded in the interdisciplinary model. It calls for sophistication in the differentiation of instruction, assessment of student achievement, and remediation. The ability to collaborate effectively is an essential skill for most teachers. The job is complex and requires excellence in pedagogy, quality communication skills, and expertise in leadership.

Implications and Recommendations

What do these results mean to current middle level teachers and principals, teacher preparation programs, and state/national organizations that serve middle level schools? What are the implications? If quality teachers are truly the answer to substantive school reform and success for all students, what actions and/or resolutions are prompted by this study?

Recruit and Retain a Diverse Faculty

It is evident from this and other research that teacher preparation programs, state/national professional organizations, and school districts must consider the importance of heightening recruitment efforts, especially for male teachers. Collaborative recruiting programs which involve higher education, K-12 school systems and professional organizations have been successful in comparable arenas and should be considered (Petzko & Scearcy, 2001). Representatives of middle level schools will not be alone in this effort, however, and the competition from elementary and secondary colleagues may be substantial. Nonetheless, the rewards of bringing dedicated people into the profession who have the desire and intent to work with early adolescents cannot be underestimated. Caring relationships with adults and guidance in facing sometimes overwhelming challenges are significant to the development of the early

adolescent (CCAD, 1989). These relationships can best be created for all students through the recruitment of a diverse and dedicated faculty.

Although teacher attrition was not specifically addressed in this study, efforts to retain teachers must be considered simultaneously with efforts to recruit them. A growing body of research and literature address this issue (Tye & O'Brien, 2002; Macdonald, 1999; Scott, Stone & Dinham, 2001). Albeit beyond the purpose and scope of this paper to make specific recommendations regarding teacher retention, school leaders are encouraged to develop a plan that parallels and supports their recruitment efforts.

Design and implement inservice professional development programs that address issues critical to effective middle level schools.

In 1997, McEwin and Dickinson stated that "only when middle level licensure becomes universally required will young adolescents have some assurance of being taught by teachers who have the specialized knowledge, skills and dispositions to be highly successful" (p. 227). This study demonstrates that although advocating for a change in licensure requirements is certainly necessary, it is not sufficient to address the immediate problem. If it is axiomatic that "no school, at whatever level, can succeed in its stated mission without the influx of specifically prepared professionals" (Dickinson & McEwin, 2002), then middle level leaders must take the initiative *now* to ensure that their teachers, regardless of their pre-service licensure, become expert at teaching young adolescents.

It is clear from this research that an significant majority of middle level teachers have not been specifically prepared to teach early adolescents. Many do not use performance based assessment; few implement multiage grouping as a way to differentiate instruction. While most teachers are expected to individualize instruction for gifted students as well as students with disabilities, less than half design remediation activities to assure content mastery. It is therefore

compelling that every middle level leader assess the knowledge and skills of the school's current faculty regarding middle level philosophy and organization, adolescent development, and developmentally appropriate curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Professional development programs must be planned accordingly. It must also be anticipated that teacher knowledge and skills will vary greatly, thus "one size fits all" inservice programs should be avoided. Breakout sessions, peer coaching, teacher study groups, and on-going problem based learning must all be considered as effective avenues for implementation of professional development plans. This proposition concurs with recommendations by Flowers, Mertens and Mulhall, who called for specialized training regarding the developmental needs of young adolescents and stressed that teacher professional development must come in a variety of forms (2002).

Some schools, specifically those with high incidence of students in poverty and/or those with large class sizes or increasing violence, will need to provide additional specialized preparation that addresses these needs. The fact that these schools are not representative of the majority of the schools in the study does not suggest that these needs are irrelevant. Leaders in these schools must provide supplementary training for their teachers, perhaps advocating for additional time for staff development due to the highly challenging nature of a school context that is characterized by poverty, violence, or large class sizes.

Develop Interdisciplinary Curriculum

As confirmed by the data showing that 79% of the schools use a full or partial interdisciplinary format, the ability to teach effectively in an interdisciplinary context is critical to the middle level teacher in the beginning of the 21st century. It is important to concede, however, that the establishment of an interdisciplinary *structure* does not, in itself, result in the delivery of an interdisciplinary *curriculum* (Beane, 1990, emphasis added). Teachers must closely analyze the degree to which curriculum and instruction are organized to "allow students to connect the materials and skills learned in one class to those presented in another" (NASSP, 1985, p. 6). It

must be acknowledged that many young adolescents prefer learning in the context of real life situations and may not show much interest in studying formal academic subjects (NMSA, 1995). The curriculum must also be evaluated as to whether it is "challenging, integrative, and exploratory" (NMSA, 2001, p. 69). Teacher study groups should be established to address these standards, providing the opportunity for teachers to discuss their work, its results, and its effect on student achievement. Middle level leaders must accept and act on the conviction that "when teachers can actively study their own practice and its effect on students in their classroom, real change in teaching and learning strategies appear to occur" (NMSA, 2001 p. 76).

Demand Assurance of Mastery

"All young adolescents should have the opportunity to succeed in every aspect of the middle grades program, regardless of previous achievement or the pace at which they learn" (CCAD, 1989, p. 49). Nonetheless, early adolescence is filled with erratic growth spurts, immense variation in cognitive development, unpredictable emotions, and dominating social needs, all of which can impact student achievement. If a middle level school maintains that it is committed to success for all students, then every teacher must be able to differentiate instruction and assessment to the extent necessary for *each student* to have the opportunity to master the content. It is evident from this research however, that many middle level teachers do not provide this opportunity. Almost one half of the teachers in this study assigned a grade and moved the entire class ahead to the next topic of study, with no plan for remediation in place for students who had not demonstrated mastery. Some may not perceive that they have the skills to do so, as noted in another study, where teachers reported that their top priority for professional development was "strategies for teaching a broad range of ability levels in the same classroom" (Flowers, et. al., p. 60). Teachers must have the pedagogical knowledge and skills to use various instructional procedures and modalities in order to assure content mastery for every student, and every teacher must be held accountable to that expectation. Although the impact on professional

development may be enormous, there is no alternative in a school where the mission is for all students to succeed.

Develop Teacher Collaboration Skills

Research studies have shown that collaborative decision making is supported by teachers and administrators, can improve the school working environment, and can lead to instructional improvement and higher student achievement scores (Clark & Clark, 2002). NMSA contends that "one of the unique elements of middle level schools for teachers is the heavy emphasis on collaboration…By collaborating with internal and external audiences, teachers are not operating in isolation. This permits insights and understandings about students to be shared with others and therefore maximized." (NMSA, 2002, p. 7) This research confirms that middle level schools are commonly organized to encourage collaborative leadership, decision making and planning. What remains to be determined is if the culture of the school will promote successful collaboration. Issues raised by Clark and Clark (2002) need to be addressed: the commitment of the principal, the level of trust, the time allotted for collaborative decision making (p. 55-56). In addition, the orientation and induction procedures utilized when a new group or team is established need to be reviewed. Groups may need to engage in "team building" exercises and be helped to understand effective group process and the difficulties inherent in group decision making. Chance and Chance (2002) maintain that the school leader's efforts in the development of teacher teams can do a great deal to produce powerful results, effective performance and high achievement (p.141). The development of teacher teams is dependent on the ability of individuals in those teams to effectively collaborate.

Develop Teachers as Leaders

The involvement of teachers in the decision making process is critical to schools of the 21st century. Recent research states that "schools where teachers are given a greater voice in

making decisions that affect their jobs have significantly less turnover" (Ingersoll, 2002, p. 27). Macdonald advocates for the increase in teacher responsibility for educational decisions as a strategy for decreasing attrition (1999). The results of this study show that middle level teachers are significantly involved in the leadership of their schools. They serve on leadership teams, they act as team leaders, they assist in the selection of their teammates, they are involved in multiple and complex decisions, and they participate in the school improvement process. It is clear that many middle level schools are implementing the fifth recommendation of *Turning Points 2000*, that schools be governed by the adults who know the students best (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Consequently, it is critical that teachers develop the skills essential to be effective decision makers and leaders.

Empowerment of teachers as leaders requires that they are cognizant of their own leadership styles and strengths as well as those of the team members with whom they work. They must develop enhanced communication skills and knowledge of group dynamics. Teachers must understand issues of power, authority and influence. They must understand and be able to apply effective models of decision making. Conflict management and negotiation skills may need to be practiced. The effective school leader will design opportunities for teacher leaders to develop high levels of competency in these areas as well as in adolescent development and curriculum and instruction.

Conclusion

A growing number of researchers, educational organizations, and school reformers are framing their convictions regarding school improvement and increased student performance on the axiom that good teaching matters (Sanders & Rivers, 1998). Katie Haycock, Executive Director of The Education Trust, calls a highly qualified teacher the most important ingredient to learning (1998). A recent report on teacher quality issued by the U. S. Department of Education

states that teacher quality is more closely related to student achievement than other factors such as class size, spending, and instructional materials (USDOE, 2002).

This study depicts middle school teachers in the 21st century as teaching and working in very complex and demanding environments. That their jobs are increasingly challenging is unmistakable. Many should be commended, for 67% of their principals rate the quality of their work as 'excellent'. It is evident from this study, however, that for many their preparation is not equal to the demands. Some have not had training specific to the middle level philosophy, many are teaching in interdisciplinary environments without key knowledge and skills, and most engage in some sort of collaboration and/or leadership for which they may have no background. Yet accountability increases while teacher attrition and a teacher shortage threaten the future. It is not sufficient to only call for changes in teacher certification regulations or additional pre-service training. Increased professional development and support for current middle level teachers is imperative, and it must be done now. School systems and leaders must coordinate comprehensive and ongoing professional development programs for new teachers as well as veteran teachers. It is essential that these programs address developmentally appropriate curriculum and instructional practices as well as leadership and collaboration skills. It is imperative that professional growth plans are individualized and include accountability. To do any less would be to compromise the future success of young adolescents.

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[i] NASSP's first national study was of the *junior high school* principalship (Rock & Hemphill, 1966) and is referenced in this paper where comparison data are available.

[ii] To ensure data integrity, a post-study data analysis was conducted on grade organizational patterns, community type, and gender, including an analysis of respondents, non-respondents, and comparison of responses from the first 100 and last 100 completed returns (Valentine & Lucas, 2001). An examination of the grade organizational patterns represented by respondents showed no significant differences from the total population of 14,107 middle level schools. Analysis of community type disclosed a slight under-representation of urban schools. Rural schools were slightly over-represented. Post-study data analysis suggested that males were somewhat over-represented in this sample; male principals completed 75% of the returns, while female principals completed 25%. Although the gender distribution of the entire population of middle level principals could not be determined, approximately 65% of K-12 principals in the United States are males (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000).

[iii] "Roadblocks" were defined as obstacles that prevented the principals from providing leadership in the creation and maintenance of outstanding middle level schools.

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